Hatfield

Kipling had good reason to call Medicine Hat "the town with all hell for a basement", for the town stands directly upon immense fields of natural gas. It is possibly the feeling of standing directly above volcanic forces, which leads to an aity speculation among Medicine Hat folk -- a speculation which lends itself beautifully to the general Alberta willingness to "try anything once -- maybe twice."

I can think of no better demonstration of this philosophy than that found in the peculiar tale of Hatfield the Rainmaker.

They still remember Hatfield in Medicine Hat -- especially on hot, dry days in July -- for it was during a mighty dry period that they dickered for Hatfield's services. Their signing of the contract with him is viewed, even yet, as one of the greatest moments in the city's life. Just how successful the experiment turned out to be, is still a matter of conjecture. But the records prove that during the period in which he was hired, the "rainmaker managed to fulfill all the requirements of his contract.

In the years before 1921, the southeastern corner of Alberta had been hard hit by drouth. Farmers viewed the new year with much the same welcome as a small boy has for a dose of castor oil. It meant putting in another crop for the sun to toast over its gigantic bonfire. But the early spring of 1921, brought with it the dawn of a new hope. From the U. S. had spread the fame of Charles M. Hatfield. Organizing under the name of the United Agricultural association, the Medicine Hat farmers decided to grow a "bumper" crop again, with the help of this famous man.

Charles Hatfield was born in Fort Scott, Kansas in 1875; received a public school education in Minneapolis and then moved to California with his family. Being interested in the study of the production of rain by artifidial methods, he went to the Los Angeles public library and obtained all the books on the subject. With this information coupled with his own theories he began his life's work.

His claim went unnoticed until 1904 when he bet several Los Angeles business men he could break a drouth that was ruining the district. He set up his apparatus in the foothills of the Sierra Madre mountains, 60 miles from the city. Three days later, 1.64 inches of rain had fallen. He collected on his wager.

During the next 17 years the "rainmaker" successfully filled 42 contracts. Most famous of his "rainmakings" was in 1916 at San Diego, California.

The council of that city agreed to pay him $10,000 if he could produce enough rain in one year to fill the Morena reservoir, a large natural basin from which the city obtained its fresh water supply. Thirty-three hours after setting up equipment, a rainfall of 9.8 inches fell during the first month to give enough water for five years. But still the rains came.

Over the top of the spillway poured a four-foot stream of water. Every stream was flooded. One hundred and ten bridges were washed out. The Otay dam collapsed drowning 12 people and causing thousands of dollars in damage.

When Hatfield went to collect his money, the council refused to pay on the grounds that there had been no written contract. His financial loss was more than repaid in that his reputation was made. Hundreds of offers were made for his services. No matter what district he chose, the rain followed. With the above type of fame, it was no wonder that he was idolized by the farmers of Medicine Hat.

On January 29, 1921, a representative of the United Agricultural association signed a contract with Hatfield

to come to Alberta. The agreement provided that Hatfield build a rain precipitation and attraction plant; that it be operated from May 1 to August 1 and that he endeavor to bring about the largest possible increased precipitation in that portion of Alberta and section of territory 100 miles in radius, using Medicine Hat as the centre.

In the exchange it was agreed that "for all the rain falling from May 1 to August 1 in the described district, Hatfield should be given credit for one-half of the precipitation, at the uniform rate of $4,000 per inch up to four inches or fraction thereof. The maximum consideration under the contract to be $8,000 for a four-inch rainfall." There was to be no charge for all rainfall over four inches.

So it was that the "rainmaker" arrived in Medicine Hat on April 20. He was accompanied by his brother and assistant, Paul. The fact that a light rain was falling as they stepped off the train was considered a good omen. At a luncheon held in his honor, Hatfield promised "a rainfall such as you have not seen in five, six, seven or eight years."

On April 22, with a cook car and two wagon-loads of equipment and chemicals, he went out to Chappice Lake. This spot, 22 miles northeast of the city was the site chosen

for the experiment. He promised rain within three to six days after May 1.

So closely guarded was the actual working procedure of the apparatus that no persons in the district ever discovered the secret. From reports, the method seemed to be to erect either two or four large towers, 20 to 30 feet high around a large body of water. They were to be built on the highest points of land in the area.

On the top of each tower were galvanized iron tanks. A series of trays of specially-prepared chemicals were placed in the tanks. The chemical was believed to be copper sulphate. Each tray was connected to the ground by wire, supposedly to create radio activity although local engineers were of the opinion that there was nothing more than galvanic electricity. Hatfield claimed that the apparatus created an artificial vortex or water spout.

True to prophecy, the rain began on May 2. It was only a slight shower but everyone was happy. On the 4th, a heavy shower came. On the 5th an all-night rain had brought a total of one inch. As each day passed more rain fell and all records for precipitation for the same period were broken.

Fields were so muddy that the farmers were unable to plant their crops. Completely pleased with the results

of their expenditure, the farmers laughingly appealed to Hatfield to turn off the rain. Telegrams came from all over the district. One read,"Rain enough. Stop for a few days." Another had the message, "Better take a holiday for ten days, giving us a chance to get our land seeded. Past ten days had plenty rain to do us for six weeks." The rainmaker could have had any part of Medicine Hat for the asking at this time.

On May 20, the provincial treasurer, Hon. C. R. Mitchell, on a visit to Medicine Hat, proclaimed that the "whole district was like a vast garden."

On May 25, a motion picutre company from Toronto took pictures of the rainmaker at work.

In all other parts of Alberta where rain had been lacking there was a heavy demand for his services. But that demand was to cease later.

As in other years the dry weather came at the beginning of June. On June 6, to relieve the minds of a few anxious farmers, Hatfield promised "lots of rain before June 13". It was not until June 17 that the rain of 1.1 inch fell. It restored the crops to their former good shape and a bumper yield was expected.

But within a week the joy faded. Temperatures soared to 100 and the crops withered. A meeting of the association

on June 25 demanded action, to which Hatfield replied that "moisture conditions were very poor but unless the signs were all wrong there would be a good rain before the end of the week."

The week arrived and passed but did not bring any rain. By some peculiarity every part of Alberta was getting rain except the district around the Hatfield tower. A few light showers on July 12 gave the crops a breathing spell but that vanished under a real hot spell from the 17th to the 24th.

A good rain on July 25 achieved two purposes. It definitely gave the farmers some sort of a crop, not a bumper by any means. But it brought the total precipitation to 4.24 inches or just a shade over the amount for which the contract had been drawn.

August 1 found Hatfield taking down his towers at Chappice Lake. He met the executive of the U. A. A. and offered to reduce his guarantee by $2,500 because all sections of the district had not been benefitted equally. The committee obliged by asking him to return the following year.

The next agreement provided that the rainmaker was to receive $4,000 per inch for each inch of rain over three and up to six with a maximun payment of $12,000. Hatfield insisted that he be allowed to choose the site to place

his towers the next time. He planned on a spot about 60 miles morthwest of the city.

The train next morning carried away the rainmaker, his brother, Paul, the mysterious chemicals and the towers. But they never returned. Whether it was because many of the farmers thought that it would be a waste of money or whether it was because Hatfield had more lucrative offers elsewhere, no one seems to know. At any rate since then, as before, the Medicine Hat district has to rely on the powers that be for moisture.

Surprisingly, the rains come about the same time each year and the hot weather dries everything up about the same time each year. Maybe the Hatfield towers made a lasting impression on the skies.

I last heard of Hatield in 1936 when he was asked by one of the big movie studios in Hollywood to create a temendous rainstorm to advertise the opening of a new motion picture. Hatfield replied " I won't do it. The amount offered to me is tremendous, but I refuse to bring ruin on the crops in this district."

And that ends, as far as I know, the saga of Hatfield, the rainmaker. A hero in his own right, perhaps -- at least the subject of a good yarn.